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## The Return of Grand Sand

Area parks ready for the beach season

Monday, May 26, 2003

By Amy Bartner  
TIMES writer

As beach-maintenance crews around the Saginaw Bay cleaned and mowed for their first big weekend of the summer, some visitors longed for the clear, sandy shores they remembered while growing up.

"I used to come out here, and this was all sand," said Joe Lipan, pointing out over the beach at Bay City State Recreation Area. "We used to ride our bicycles and go down there."

Lipan, of Bay City, sat in a pavilion smoking a cigar as he looked out on the Saginaw Bay. A field of dandelions and grass gave way to taller grasses and cattails, a small patch of sand, and then, finally, the sandbar-dotted water.

"What they should do is cut this all down and turn over the sand," he said. "You've got people staying in the campground, and they want to go to something half-way decent."

Until recently, strict regulations made it difficult for people to maintain private and public beaches. Residents had to fill out an extensive application before they could mow the weeds on their beaches or move sand. Last Monday, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality allowed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop new guidelines.

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Now, people are able to mow to the waterline without a permit. They can hand-pull weeds, within reason.

Mike Evanoff, park supervisor at Bay City State Recreation Area, said the park has received a joint permit from the DEQ and the Corps allowing it to maintain a stretch of beach 35 feet back from the water's edge, and 550 feet across.

"The shoreline has always been something we've had to direct staff and resources to keep up and maintain," Evanoff said. "We've recognized the importance of the beach area to the local people and the economy."

The park had permits for some years in the past, Evanoff said, but didn't have one last year.

Evanoff said before the permit, they were only allowed to take care of the land to the high-water mark. This wasn't a problem until the recent recession of the bay's waters.

"Of course with the low water, that's really brought about the focus of the shoreline vegetation," he said. "Last summer we were just trying to keep it clean above the high water mark."

But this year, Evanoff said the park will use its beach-cleaning machine once a week to clean garbage and to keep the sand clean.

They won't mow or destroy the weeds, Evanoff said.

"We've been working on it the last few days to get it ready for the holiday weekend," he said.

John Henderson, a teacher from St. John's Lutheran in Saginaw, brought a science class of 11 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders to the Bay City State Recreation Area last week for a field trip. He said he remembers how the beach used to look.

The group went fishing, and then took a walk along the shoreline.

"We used to go swimming right here when I was in high school," Henderson told the students as they were standing in the middle of a field of marshland.

Fourteen-year-old Megan Jacob said she wasn't impressed with the beach.

"It stunk and there were dead fish," she said, scrunching her nose. "And it's really mucky when you try to go out there."

In Caseville, the beach is getting prepared for the summer traffic, too.

George Lauinger, supervisor of Sleeper State Park in Caseville, said

the park doesn't have as big a problem with weeds as other places. Still, the park applied for and received a permit to keep the beach groomed this summer.

Lauinger said the park uses a tractor pulling a rake to clean up the beach once a week during the summer, but he might cut back on the amount they use it.

"We don't have to destroy much vegetation when we rake," he said. "It's just a relatively sterile-looking, sandy beach."

Doris Beyer and her husband, Gerhard, camped at the Sleeper State Park campground for a few days last week. They like to take walks on the beach and they noticed how clean the beach was.

"We walked on the beach yesterday and there were millions of these tiny little shells," she said. "And when we went today, they were all gone. The beach is just marvelous. We were really impressed with how they've maintained it."

Port Crescent State Park in Port Austin also received permits, but doesn't have a problem keeping the beaches marsh-free.

"We never removed vegetation, we never mowed," said Betsy Kish, unit supervisor at Port Crescent State Park.

Kish said her staff uses a tractor with a rake to keep the beach looking nice.

"It's more of an aesthetic thing," she said.

Oak Beach County Park in Port Austin and Caseville County Park in Caseville have both applied for permits to level the sand and to use a beach cleaner. Like Bay City's park, there is a limited portion of beach they're permitted to groom.

"It takes a lot longer to get to water's edge," said Steve Romzek, superintendent of the Huron County Parks, laughing about the low waters. "But if you don't do it, it'll make less people come."

Don Stanley, a food service manager from Bangor Lincoln Elementary School, who helped with a field trip to the Bay City State Recreation Area, said he lives near the beach and the maintenance being planned will bring in more people.

"You never see anyone on the beach," he said.

What would he like to see there?

"Sand."

- Amy Bartner is a staff writer for The Times. She can be reached at 1-800-875-4444, ext. 647 or (989) 894-9647.

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